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ABSTRACT

The teaching of history is part of the continuous process of redefining American civilization that lies at the center of what it means to be an American. A major challenge facing teachers of U.S. history is how to strike an appropriate balance between the forces of continuity and change. Much of the concern over history standards and the choice of textbooks revolves around the larger social, cultural, and political role of the formal course. The teaching of U.S. history in high school serves many other goals. Two texts, "America! America!" (1977), and "The Americans" (1998), can be used to determine how U.S. history, as an educational subject in schools, has changed throughout these two decades, or to note how many continuities have endured. Both were conceived as fresh, new approaches to the subject, and teams of authors, editors, and consultants in each case rethought and recast the traditional textbook. Both adopted a different design, focused on a single column of text, to facilitate innovation. In the final analysis, teachers and students will be challenged to fashion a personal adventure out of their study of America's past. No two teachers, no two students, no two classes will thread their way through the long annals of the American adventure in exactly the same way. Educators wrestle with the enormous potential of technology for teaching history, along with the prospect of local roots, the use of primary sources as major instructional tools, the expansion of materials used by historians, teachers, and students, and the growing ties that bind U.S. history to other parts of the curriculum. (BT)

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American History in the Schools:
Its Nature, Functions and Prospect

by
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N.B. This is a rough draft of a paper prepared for a panel at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies, Cincinnati, Ohio, November 21, 1997. It is meant for discussion purposes only. Suggestions and criticism are most welcome.

The teaching of history is part of the continuous process of redefining American civilization that lies at the center of what it means to be an American. From the earliest use of the name up to the present day, Americans have looked to the future as a time when things will be changed. Tomorrow, indeed, will be a better day. Americans often thought of the past as somehow holding back efforts of present generations to live in freedom, to satisfy visions of equality, to establish justice, or to fulfill the promises held out by technology, the market place, and individual opportunity. To be an American, in this perspective, is to give three cheers for change, urging on the transformations of time.

People, Space, and Time

And yet the affirmation of a common past, however forlorn and beleaguered, is one of the fundamental ways any society holds itself together. A nation as diverse as the United States, whose multi-ethnic character was cast at the very beginning, needs a central story to really tell us who we are and to strengthen those bonds of loyalty upon which nationhood depends. Then there

is the spatial extent of the United States, crossing a continent, even extending beyond, whose history demands a stage large enough to include the story of every place in fifty diverse states.

Then there are the demands of time. The U. S. Constitution established one of the oldest governments functioning today. But the founders from the Old World were here centuries before 1789, and the roots of our fundamental documents reach across the Atlantic into the much deeper soil of Western Civilization. But other people were already here for many millennia when the first Europeans arrived. The inclusive stance demanded by contemporary society has pushed the standard account of American history back to the very dim lights of the glacial age. Every school child now knows what my teachers in the 1950s could scarcely fathom: that the first Americans hunted prehistoric big game animals as the mountains of ice slowly retreated northward to reveal the reshaped land we call America today.

People, space, and time, three rubrics, each in its own way, has added to the complexity of American history at the same time that it has pressed upon thoughtful minds the necessity, yea the centrality, of American history's place in the modern curriculum. The recent discussions of national goals for our schools, of national standards for each core subject, and of national tests to gauge the effectiveness of instruction has certainly caught the attention of the press, the political leaders, and the general public. The great burdens heaped on the American history course in these debates and discussions, especially outside of

educational circles, should come as no surprise to thoughtful observers. After all, America means progress. And improvement, in turn, rests on change which is the essence of history. If there is no change, there can scarcely be a history. If there is no history, how can we notice the changes?

To be set in one's ways, to be chained to any particular version of the past, seems to work against the American gain. An appropriate American history is therefore a hopeful tale, a story of reform and progress, the annals of invention and transformation. Yet at the same time societal needs press for continuity, for links to a common legacy, and for the thoughtful embrace of a heritage we can agree upon. As history itself blends change and continuity, so the American public expects its teachers of American history to simultaneously inculcate a respect for tradition and an openness to new possibilities.

Thus a major challenge facing teachers of American history is how to strike an appropriate balance between the forces of continuity and those of change. It is not something that we often think about, as teachers, as parents, or as the general public. But much of the concern over history standards or the choice of textbooks revolves around the larger social, cultural, and political role of the formal course. The teaching of American history, of course, serves many other goals, and the processes of acculturation and political socialization, we would agree, are much more complex. But at no place are these functions so accessible as in the high school American history

course. Here, it often seems, social commendatory envision one generation passing the reigns to the next.

Passing the Reins

"Passing the reins" was a common practice in the stagecoach era as drivers pushed for speed and efficiency. It was always a complex process when done in motion as the driver handed the controls to the person riding shotgun. The new editor of a scholarly journal (Paul F. ~~Sabins~~ Starrs in The Geographical Review, 86:1, January, 1996) recalled a conversation with a descendant of a driver in the Wild West where the stage road rose abruptly from the Carson Valley of Nevada up the wall of the Sierra Nevada up to Lake Tahoe. The demanding ascent of 3000 feet in four miles presented quite a challenge, as it does even today with all the advantages of Highway 50. In the wagon days, six to ten horses were needed to make the grade, each one, of course, led by a separate pair of reins. Imagine passing the reins on that ascent, which was regularly done to relieve the driver's fatigue about half way up the slope. The horses needed to keep their momentum, steadily straining upward while the six to ten leads, each intricately tied on the fingers of one hand, had to be carefully passed to one's partner. One at a time; eyes focused ahead; ten on this hand, ten on that; right hand first; easy does it. Any misstep in this delicate operation brought the risk of a grave crisis. The image reminds me of the American history course, the content on one hand, the pedagogy on the other,

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teacher on the left, student on the right.

As educators prepare the next generation to take society's stagecoach over the next hill they do not often face the challenge of Kingsbury Grade. But they do confront, every day, the taxing problem of multiple reins, representing the various objectives assigned to their teaching.

Using the same illustration in a different light, the multiple horses might stand for the various dimensions of an American history course in the schools, each reign in the teacher's hands leading to a different goal: literacy, culture, citizenship, critical thinking, character, decision making, respect, and so on. Although we do not deal with this type of an image for teaching very often in our education of teachers, it seems to be explicit in all of our preparations for teaching from the forging of lesson plans to the production of textbooks.

Textbooks as Primary Sources

The development of a major textbook could surely afford some insight into the nature, function, and prospects of American history as a school subject. I have been close enough on several occasions to note the general process of textbook development in American history. The finished products, the textbooks themselves, have long been recognized as key sources by scholars trying to reconstruct what happened in the schools of past. Maybe a key ingredient in the social education of social studies teachers is to help them view their texts as primary sources, to

search for the larger forces of acculturation and socialization embedded in the curriculum, and then to use these insights as windows to understanding the American way itself.

This is a tall order, certainly beyond the confines of a single paper or a lone commentator. But the idea is intriguing and the occasion of the publication this year of The Americans makes it auspicious to offer a few preliminary observations.

One could emphasize the role of a historian and use the two texts. America! America!, published in 1977, and The Americans, copyrighted in 1998, as documents to mark how American history as a school subject has changed over these two decades, or to note how many continuities have endured. Both were conceived as fresh, new approaches to the subject and teams of authors, editors and consultants were recruited in each case to rethink and recast the traditional textbook. Both adopted a different design, focused on a single column of text, to facilitate innovation. The standard double column crams more words onto a page, but both of these textbooks were conceived with the idea that encyclopedic knowledge was not at the heart of the matter.

Instead, each project, embracing different waves of the movement to social history, wanted each student to discover America on his/her own, to participate personally in the continuing American Revolution. The cover of America! America! was a hand-tooled leather book jacket that made the textbook look like a personal scrapbook. The opening quotation from Mary Antin shouted excitedly, "So at last I was going to America! Really,

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really going, at last! The boundaries burst. The arch of heaven soared. A million suns shown out for every star. The winds rushed in from outer space, roaring in my ears, 'America! America!'" Then, on the title page spread, an assortment of snapshots mounted on a background of traditional fabric introduced readers to 17 ordinary Americans. There was to be no doubt that students should feel from the very start that this book was about them and their families.

The later volume, addressed to a secondary school rather than a junior high school audience, moves its portrait gallery to the cover itself, presenting a cast of characters, great and small, that will make up the story of The Americans. A professional historian is called upon to make the invocation: "The Genius of America lies in its capacity to forge a single nation from peoples of remarkably diverse racial, religious, and ethnic origins....The American identity will never be fixed and final: it will always be in the making." (Arthur M. Schlesinger) The Americans thus sounds a different theme at the onset: the nation is in the process of becoming rather than being a place of arrival, in a subtle way, perhaps, shifting the emphasis from continuity to change.

Front Matters

When viewing a textbook as a historical document the messages sent by the cover design, the title page, and the front matter seem to grow in importance. Publishers generally are

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devoting more attention to these introductory pages, providing a carefully designed format, furnishing illustrations on nearly every page, and adding additional features to turn the formal front matter into instructional tools. The Americans, for example, devotes 39 pages to this section so that all of the contents and special features can be clearly presented and illustrated in an engaging way.

The introductory section ends with eight teenagers from around the country answering the question, "What is an American?" Each student is pictured so even a casual reader gets the idea that this book encompasses a great variety of people even as it focuses on central themes of acculturation: the meaning of America, personal versions of the American dream, and the challenges that face the nation as it enters the next century.

The front matter of The Americans also calls attention to three other salient features of contemporary textbooks. First, it takes three pages to list all of the authors, consultants, advisors, and reviewers. These include academics, members of teacher panels convened across the country, and several dozen students who provided input from a user's perspective. The editorial team, for some reason, is not included, but it would take up another entire page of credits. In contrast to America! America! which was produced by four authors, three consultants, and two editors, a major textbook in our time needs a much larger cast. The impression given is that many points of view were

considered as The Americans developed and that it is broadly based in the social order rather than being the personal statement of a small group of individual authors.

A second characteristic of the new textbook, strikingly illustrated by the table of contents, is how carefully the book is organized. Like America! America!, the volume divides into units of study, nine in the case of the 1998 volume compared to 13 for the 1977 book. The Americans , however, emphasizes the unit organization from the very beginning, providing a separate page up front to describe each unit's contents. This "unit organization" page details the various chapters, lessons, and features that make up the unit, using a color coded scheme to sort out the various aspects at a glance. Illustrations down the margin of page present people, artifacts, and documents that call attention to major events, themes, and actors in this segment of the story. Obviously the table of contents in The Americans is meant for constant reference and continuing referral.

Perhaps this careful attention to organizational matters is called for because of the increasing length of the textbooks, reaching 1200 pages (and weighing in at five pounds) or it may point to the complexity of society's expectations for the American history course. But additional reasons suggest themselves when considering the third notable characteristic of the front matter: the careful description and listing of the special features of the project, each of which receives a separate page, or a set of pages as needed. Students will find

these pages helpful in understanding the various parts from which each unit is assembled, a key to using the book in the most beneficial way. The detailed lists of features also enhance the reference character of the book, supplementing the index as a topical finding aid.

The systematic design of the book and its comprehensive reach could provide it with a notable afterlife, that is a use as a reference book after a student has read it, chapter by chapter, as an instructional tool. Given the broader social, cultural, and political functions of the American history course, it seems natural that American citizens would want to keep their personal handbook of American history for later use and personal reference. The current practice of public ownership of textbooks, where students use them for a year and then return them, unscratched and unmarked, for the next class to use, seems to run counter to the expectations of society. Many features of modern secondary school textbooks, especially those of American history, would make them useful volumes on the personal bookshelves of American citizens.

The length of contemporary textbooks, as well as the variety of features which support the basic text, place additional demands on teachers. The textbook I used as a high school junior back in the 1950s was shorter by a third and came with very few supplementary materials. From the teacher's perspective, therefore, the detailed lists of features at the beginning The Americans often a way to survey the whole textbook, suggesting

what elements to emphasize, where supplementary materials may be introduced, and how particular projects or assignments might be tied directly to a feature, a biographical reference, or a primary source.

Features

The front matter makes it clear that there is more in this textbook than a normal class could adequately discuss in the usual year allotted to American history. In each unit the instructor is given various handles to steer the course in an one direction or another. Students who need to develop various study skills from working with chronology to formulating historical questions to using the Internet can be directed to a "Skillbuilder Handbook" at the back of the book. Indeed, a teacher committed to fundamentals could emphasize a different skill every week of the term.

Another instructor might want to rouse the flagging interest of students by emphasizing the American Stories video series which provides documentaries, each about ten minutes in length, to "flesh out" various individuals mentioned in the text. Any instructor who has viewed these fascinating treatments and surveyed the accompanying documents or discussion starters will immediately perceive how effective these take off points could be for group work or special projects. Page xvii of The Americans lists the whole series in chronological order and pictorially connects the subjects of these films with the characters

portrayed on the book's cover.

A dozen special features regularly appear throughout the text, usually once or twice per unit for the longer ones but much more often for the shorter ones, depending on the circumstances. Each of these is given a complete list in the introductory section to aid teachers who want to build special dimensions into their courses. Four features always receive a two-page spread: "Tracing Themes," which ties various units together, "Geography Spotlight," which usually focuses attention on map reading and interpretation, "Daily Life," which demonstrates how many different ways American have found to live their everyday lives, and "American Studies," which demonstrates the value of art, architecture, and literature to the student of history.

The remaining features are shorter, taking advantage of the one-column design to occupy the space along the margins of the pages. "Economic Background" explains the economic principles at work in various events. "Point-Counterpoint" introduces conflicting historical interpretations while "On the World Stage" connects American History to the wider world. "Another Perspective" looks at events from minority viewpoints while "Difficult Decisions" raises various issues involved as major questions were resolved. "Historical Spotlight" enables the text to expand on various items of interest without breaking the flow of the narrative in the main text.

Readers will be surprised at how often direct quotations from primary source materials are woven into this basic narrative

in each chapter, usually about ten times. The front matter carefully lists these "Primary Sources and Personal Voices," chapter by chapter, providing author, source, and page number. An alert teacher will perceive the value of this four page list of documentary materials for student reports, individual research assignments, or enrichment activities.

One purpose in systematically describing all these features in several dozen pages of front matter is to help teachers use the textbook with a sense of mastery, providing an inventory of the resources available so that they can fashion a meaningful course for a group of particular students. Different sections of the same course can find common ground in the basic narrative of The Americans but, at the same time, each class can follow different leads under the direction of the teacher to emphasize those aspects of American history according to special interests or needs.

In the final analysis, teachers and students will be challenged to fashion a personal adventure out of their study of America's past. No two teachers, no two students, no two classes will thread their way through the long annals of the American adventure in exactly the same way. Each will take a different path across the vast reaches of American space, or knit into their course fabric a slightly different cast of characters. Contemporary American history textbooks, this one included, open up a vast subject rather than restricting it to a set of agreed upon facts and dates. A history embracing such richness, rooted

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a bit differently in each locality, and given various shadings according to personal experience and family heritage, cannot be reduced to a simple formula and still have the same meaning or appeal.

Prospects

So what are the prospects for the American history course? Every report tells us that it is alive and well and living in every school in the nation. It takes various shapes to be sure. State curricula, local conditions, the craft of individual teachers, the varying needs of particular classes, and the individuality of each student's learning style, all added to the magnitude of society's expectations and the lavish richness of the textbooks, turn the American history course into a sprawling institution. It is vital, constantly changing, like American culture itself. And we as a profession and a society applaud the changes even as we search for deeper commonalities and binding continuities.

The social, cultural, and political demands on the course continue unabated. Indeed, the very existence of the subject of American history, both as an academic discipline and as a school subject, suggests its enduring function as a primary agent of socialization and acculturation. History remains the major way in which the various strands of American culture can be brought together into a meaningful whole. As long as the nation-state reigns as the world's dominant form of political organization, there will be a need for American history. Indeed the success of

the school subject has caught the attention of educators abroad as much as it has attracted the concern of critics at home.

Our point of entry into this topic, the publication of a new textbook, has underscored the central role, the enduring purposes, and the multi-dimensional nature of the secondary school course. Five other issues, lesser in scope but also worthy of discussion, come to mind as we reflect on its immediate prospects.

Technology is first and foremost. The overhead projector and the videotape player, neither given any attention when we worked on America! America! two decades ago, now are ubiquitous in classrooms. The Americans has demonstrated, we believe, how these teaching aids can be integrated into a textbook. The Internet also holds out promise and is plugged into the new textbook in a variety of ways. But the use of computers in social studies classes remains spotty. Educators continue to wrestle with the enormous potential of the computer on the one hand and its transforming character on the other. Should we really let the camel in the tent? No area of teaching American history today is more in need of serious thought.

A second prospect, that of local roots, is much more manageable and has a long history of parallel development with the secondary school course. An interest in local history, family history, community studies. historic sites, and the heritage expressed in the built environment has never been stronger in American society, yet this branch of the historical

enterprise continues to run on a different track parallel to the high school course. The success of history fairs and History Day, buttressed by the project approach to learning, has touched many schools and individual teachers and students, but it is conspicuous by its absence in current textbooks, standards, and discussions of curricular reform. Could it be that two decades hence the new technology will make it possible to have customized editions of The Americans for each state, or city, or school, or individual?

The third prospect, the use of primary sources as major instructional tools, recalls its flash of glory in the days of the New Social Studies during the 1960's and early 1970's. The Americans makes continuous use of primary source materials, but they are integrated into the narrative flow. Ancillary programs make available a variety of primary sources for in-depth study. Indeed the video program forms an interesting bridge between textbook reading and the analysis of documents. Yet the source method of teaching history is definitely cast in a supporting role rather than given a lead part. Researchers have discovered that many classes purporting to be based on primary sources are mislabeled. At best the source method accounts for five percent of instruction in American history classes. Yet educational theory, the urge to develop history's habits of mind, the advantages offered by the new technology, and the quest for personal and community roots all raise the prospect of increased attention to the source method of instruction in the near future.

A fourth prospect grows directly out of the third, namely the expansion of materials used by historians, teachers, and students as primary sources. The conquests of social and cultural history have turned everything into grist for the historians mill. The new textbooks document this continuing expansion of the historian's world as art, architecture, popular culture, landscapes, house and home are all given some attention, usually in supplementary features. The school building, the culture of the classroom, and, as we know, the textbook itself are living documents of the American way as close to real life as it is possible to get for high school students.

The fifth prospect for the American history course notes the growing ties which bind it to other parts of the curriculum. Viewing the course in isolation, as we have done, misses the extent to which it is embedded in the life of schools. Isolating a school subject for independent analysis, as a textbook window subtly encourages, misses how American history is called up to provide a context for other courses, for co-curricular activities, and for the school culture as a whole. Features on American studies, technology, and everyday life point to future prospects when other subjects like mathematics and the sciences will establish stronger ties to the American history course.

The prospects, in short, are for continuing changes in the American history course and in the instructional tools, like textbooks, which support it. If educators look closely at the

immediate future, they will be forced, I believe, to consider the changing roles for students and teachers at the same time that they remain convinced of the continuing purposes of American history in our society. The realization that their school experiences are part of the historic process itself, rather than a detached account of it, will probably come as a revelation to most teenagers, and, perhaps, to many of their teachers and parents as well.

The protean nature of historical studies comes as no surprise to professional historians or textbook developers, and it offers both a perspective and a larger purpose for annual meetings of the National Council for the Social Studies. Proteus was not the god of history, and he never set foot in America, but given his legendary ability to assume different forms and to assume new roles, he would fit right into our midst and would, I am confident, put a stamp of approval on many of our efforts.